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SUBJECT: THE POST-COUP AL QAEDA THREAT IN MAURITANIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The military regime has highlighted an increased terrorist threat as one argument the international community should accept their coup -- raising some questions whether the terrorist threat has substantially changed or whether it is being played up by the regime for political purposes. Mission believes a confluence of various factors increase the likelihood of AQIM activities staged out of Mali even as the risk of an internally-launched attack is reduced.

We find the Mauritanian military and security services taking the external threat seriously and applying new levels of their own resources to address the problem -- albeit in a somewhat ad hoc fashion. Increased security presence in Nouakchott proper does have a certain aspect of political showmanship to highlight the need for security. We have not seen the Mauritanian counter-terrorist efforts used as an excuse for political repression. End Summary

12. (S) Post Coup Events Make Al Qaeda Stronger: The September 15 AQIM attack in Tourine clearly demonstrates the ongoing desire and capability of AQIM to launch attacks from bases in northern Mali well into Mauritanian territory. The unprecedented violence of beheading captured Mauritians highlights not just an increase in activity but in terror. Mission assessment is that planning for the early September incursion was started before the coup and was not in response to General Aziz' takeover or a component of the jihad called against the regime. Mauritanian counter-terrorism efforts prior to the coup including substantially increased and overt military cooperation with the U.S. and the arrest of over 60 AQIM members and supporters inside Mauritania likely motivated the attack. Since the September 15 attack, the Mauritians have continued to arrest AQIM elements as well as some probable AQIM-wannabes that should further provoke AQIM. The terrorists' successful experience in the Austrian hostage taking and the 1.5 to 2 million Euro ransom payment will both encourage and enable AQIM to do more. Multiple reports of an entente between AQIM and the Malians that AQIM will not conduct strikes in Mali leads Post to believe at least some of the ransom money will be destined for Mauritania -- perhaps financing the VBIED threats rumored for months. Mauritanian security counterparts report a significant up-tick in AQIM's Mauritanian recruitment -- a trend verified in at least one case by recruitment within the family of a Mission contact. Some reports indicate over 100 Mauritians have been recruited in recent months -- driven by a supply/demand combination of AQIM's increased "credibility" and AQIM's need to rebuild its disabled internal networks.

13. (C) Military increasing counterterrorism resources: The September 15 attack generated strong criticism of the military high command for being derelict in their primary

duty of protecting the country from outside attack. Post-coup faith in the military had fallen so low that rumors persisted for weeks that the attack either was staged or, worse still, was organized by the military themselves in order to build their message that the military had to be in place to maintain security. Widely-circulated reports that the Nouakchott high command had countermanded the decisions of the unit and regional commanders to assume a defensive position to, instead, drive through the night into an easy ambush drew into question the professionalism of those who launched the coup. Nearly two weeks following the attack, the High Command sent elements from General Aziz' own Presidential Security Battalion - BASEP - to reinforce the garrison to Zouerate as a show of concern (those units, however, redeployed back to Nouakchott after two weeks). More substantially, the military deployed forces from their paratrooper battalion (the BCP) and quickly equipped and deployed the anti-terrorist GLATR unit the U.S. had been training for over a year. The deployment of the GLATR was particularly significant because they were given the vehicles that had prevented them from being effective. Since we are aware of no significant new arms imports since the coup, the assumption is that the vehicles came out of stocks reserved for the BASEP. Within the past few weeks, we have heard that the military is planning to substantially increase the number of troops specifically targeted against the terrorist threat. The plan calls for four GLATR units spread around the country. The first GLATR will be the unit we have been training covering the northern region. A second GLATR will be the re-named FUMA that was trained several years ago by the U.S. covering the southeastern region around Nema. Two other GLATRs are to be created out of the units previously pulled together for peacekeeping operations. It is not clear where these two units will be deployed. We understand the commander of one of these units has refused orders to deploy because his unit is not properly trained or equipped for the mission. In all this, we do see a serious reallocation of resources to meet the terrorist threat. Some of this effort -- such as provisioning and deploying the GLATR - seems sincere and credible. Other efforts -- such as the short-lived deployment of the BASEP or the abracadabra conversion of raw peacekeeping infantry into counterterrorist specialist - seem ad hoc tactics to deflect criticism.

14. (S - N/F) Intelligence operations maintaining high tempo: The Mauritanian security services have always taken the terrorist threat more seriously than the military or civilian government. Only the December 2007 AQIM attacks had brought the others around to see the threat -- particularly the internal threat - as real. The violence of the Tourine attacks have clearly reinforced the military's attention. The Mauritanian security services continue to discover and arrest persons affiliated with terrorism with over 30 arrests since the coup. The majority of these arrests have been linked to strong Al Qaeda connections. A few, such as the recent arrests in Tidjikja, seem driven more by paranoia having involved the arrest of, at worst, young AQIM wannabes. Mission does not see the Mauritanian security services creating threats to influence Western governments to support the coup. The security chiefs themselves are increasingly distracted by their political role within the High State Council but continue to make final policy decisions within their agencies.

15. (C) Some strutting in Nouakchott: The one area where Mission does see the regime trying to hype the security threat is in Nouakchott proper. While the military vehicles that deployed as a show of force after the coup are long gone, police presence throughout the city is greatly increased. Police roadblocks backed by never-before-seen armored police vehicles spring up every night at all major intersections. To our knowledge, these checkpoints have had no impact whatsoever in capturing suspected terrorists; rather, they seem intended to give an air of security. In fairness, the spate of carjackings and rapes seen prior to the coup has gone away (although some extreme anti-coup militants accuse the military of being behind the crime wave

to undermine Abdallahi).

¶6. (C) No political crack-down under the guise of counter-terrorism: Despite the increased military and security activity underway under the rubric of counter-terrorism, Mission has not seen the regime use these actions to repress opposition -- except to the extent the heightened police presence also deters political protests. The leadership of the Islamist parties, for instance, have not been harassed on terrorism charges despite the connection the regime draws between these parties and Abdallahi's "soft" stand on terrorism.

¶7. (C) No Requests: Post has received no specific requests for military assistance in response to the terrorist threat since a September 15 request for aerial surveillance against the Tourine attack (unfortunately, our aircraft had left country on the 13th). The military continues to hope for a return to our previous robust military cooperation, but they seem to assume any specific request now will be denied. Other aerial surveillance platforms are available on request from other partners. The Spanish have allocated 20 hours counterterrorism flying time for their migration -monitoring Cessna Caravan based in Nouakchott. A French "Breguet" maritime patrol aircraft based in Dakar is also available when needed. Both have ISR capabilities although the Spanish contracted plane is "low and slow" with minimal time on station and the French aircraft is a large fuel-guzzler. The Mauritians have used their own Basler converted DC-3 for reconnaissance but that plane has no surveillance capabilities. The Mauritians impounded a drug-carrying twin-engine Cessna 441 with similar characteristics to the Creeksand platform several years ago. That has the range and speed to be effective as an ISR platform but would need a costly and complicated retrofit.

HANKINS